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SEARCHING FOR “HAPPINESS”: JOSEPH SMITH’S ALLEGED AUTHORSHIP OF THE 1842 LETTER TO NANCY RIGDON

Gerrit Dirkmaat

“HAPPINESS IS THE OBJECT AND DESIGN of our existence, and will be the end thereof, if we pursue the path that leads to it; and this path is virtue, uprightness, faithfulness, holiness, and keeping all the

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commandments of God.” This teaching attributed to Joseph Smith is one of the most well known and oft quoted. Many members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints see this teaching of their founding prophet as a succinct and beautiful statement, not only giving the purpose of humankind’s creation, but also a simple explanation of how that happiness can be achieved. It has been quoted in firesides and talks, in Sunday school lessons, and in apologetic writings. Yet despite the nearly ubiquitous acceptance of this teaching, historical inquiry and examination of the source of this teaching and its provenance has generally been superficial and insufficient.

Many would be surprised to learn that the source of this iconic Joseph Smith teaching was perhaps one of Smith’s greatest adversaries, John C. Bennett. Once a member of the First Presidency and a highly praised leader and mayor of Nauvoo, Illinois, allegations of false teaching and sexual indiscretions led to Bennett’s resignation from his office and excommunication from the Church in mid 1842.¹ Following Bennett’s schism with the LDS Church in Nauvoo, he proceeded to expose what he claimed to be the secret inner workings of Mormonism. He published a variety of documents and statements in the Springfield, Illinois-based *Sangamo Journal* and in other papers designed to discredit Mormonism in general and Smith in particular. Bennett implicated Smith in the assassination attempt on former governor of Missouri Lilbourn Boggs and asserted that Smith was scurrilously demanding the property of his converts in Nauvoo for his own personal gain. Perhaps most damning, Bennett declared that Smith had seduced “hundreds of single and married females” by means of introducing a system of “spiritual wifery” that Bennett contended was all too physical in its design to gratify Joseph Smith’s libidinous “licentiousness.”²

Among the “hundreds of such cases” of which Bennett claimed to have knowledge was the experience of Nancy Rigdon, the nineteen-year-old daughter of Sidney Rigdon, counselor in the First Presidency of the church. Bennett avowed that Smith had told him of his desire to make Nancy Rigdon a “spiritual wife” and that he had offered Bennett a substantial cash reward if he could effect such a union for him. Bennett further alleged that after he adamantly refused to help

¹For a complete history of Bennett’s life and affiliation with Mormonism, see Andrew F. Smith, *The Sainly Scoundrel: The Life and Times of Dr. John Cook Bennett* (Champaign: Illinois University Press, 1997).

²“Astounding Mormon Disclosures,” *Sangamo Journal*, July 8, 1842.

with the scheme, Smith had arranged a meeting with Nancy himself through Marinda Hyde some time shortly after April 9, 1842.³ Bennett explained that Smith failed during his private interview with Nancy Rigdon to secure her approval of the proposal despite pressuring her behind a closed and locked door. He asserted that, undaunted, Smith had later dictated a letter to his scribe, Willard Richards, which was sent to Nancy Rigdon to explain the propriety of plural marriage and to encourage her to accept his proposal. This letter was published in *Sangamo Journal* along with Bennett's explanation for it as Smith's "love letter" to Nancy Rigdon on August 19, 1842. Bennett was en route to New York at the time, where he planned to hold public speaking engagements and write a book to further denounce Joseph Smith's actions. Covering his speaking tour, the *New York Herald* published the alleged letter to Nancy Rigdon in its pages as well.⁴

The Mormons took various efforts to try to defuse the negative response to Bennett's widely published claims. Affidavits were taken from multiple people denouncing Bennett and his allegations. In late August a conference was held for the purpose sending out scores of elders to "deluge the States with a flood of truth" in response to the "falsehoods put in circulation by John C. Bennett." Nearly four hundred men volunteered to be a part of this effort. Bennett's allegations clearly led to some type of confrontation between Sidney Rigdon and Joseph Smith on June 28; this encounter was recorded in Smith's journal and was also reported by Bennett in his July 2 letter to the *Sangamo Journal*, of course with differing explanations.⁵

³Bennett stated that Hyde had approached Nancy Rigdon at Ephraim R. Marks's funeral and told her that Joseph Smith wanted to meet with her. That funeral occurred on April 9. Bennett alleged that the meeting occurred the following Thursday, April 14, as Smith had been unavailable when Nancy made her first attempt. By Bennett's account the letter was sent soon after that meeting and Nancy had been told, apparently in a separate communication, to burn it after reading it.

⁴"Discussion by General Bennett about Joe Smith and the Mormons," *New York Herald*, August 31, 1842.

⁵Joseph Smith's journal recorded of the incident: "President Joseph in company with Bishop Miller visited Elder Rigdon & his family and had much conversation about J.C. Bennet & others. Much unpleasat [unpleasant] feeling was manifested by Elder Rigdon's family who were confounded

Nevertheless, days after the letter appeared in the *Sangamo Journal*, Sidney Rigdon wrote a letter to the editor of the church-owned *Wasp*, on behalf of Nancy Rigdon, in which he refuted Bennett's claim that Smith was the author, but he did not deny the existence of a letter. The cryptic denial read thus: "The letter which has appeared in the *Sangamo Journal*, making part of General Bennett's letters to said paper, purporting to have been written by Mr. Joseph Smith to her, was unauthorized by her, and that she never said to Gen. Bennett or any other person, that said letter was written by said Mr. Smith, nor in his hand writing, but by another person, and in another person's hand writing."⁶ Sidney Rigdon added at the end of the letter, "I would further state that Mr. Smith denied to me the authorship of that letter." The denial of Joseph's authorship did not come from the Rigdons alone; before Sidney's response to the allegation was published, the *Wasp* also gave an emphatic denial: "What purports to be a letter from Joseph Smith to Miss Nancy Rigdon, [is] without date, name, or proof, and if it had these, is, upon the whole, more moral than Bennett ever was or will be of himself,—but we hope the community are not yet quite so far from the common course of

& put to silence by the truth. from Prst-Joseph." Bennett's account of the altercation was entirely different: "[Joseph Smith] by boisterous words and violent gestures tried to deny the attempted seduction and alarm the girl: but she told him he was a cursed liar, and that he could not face her to it. Joe then made a full acknowledgment of the whole affair. All the family, and many other persons were present." Andrew H. Hedges, Alex D. Smith, and Richard Lloyd Anderson, eds., *Journals, Vol. 2, December 1841–April 1843*, Vol. 2 of the Journal series of THE JOSEPH SMITH PAPERS, general editors Dean C. Jessee, Ronald K. Esplin, and Richard Lyman Bushman (Salt Lake City: Church Historian's Press, 2011), 71 (hereafter JSP Journals); "Further Mormon Developments!! 2d Letter from Gen. Bennett," *Sangamo Journal*, July 15, 1842.

⁶Though written for the *Wasp*, Sidney Rigdon's denial was actually first published in a special *Times and Seasons* publication entitled "Affidavits and Certificates Disproving the Statements and Affidavits contained in John C. Bennett's Letters," on August 31, 1842. It was published four days later in the *Wasp* as well, with the addition of a postscript directed at the papers that had published Bennett's claims connecting Nancy Rigdon to the letter and asking them to publish the denial as "an act of justice to Miss Rigdon."

Justice and propriety to take Bennett's word for the truth or fallacy of the curious thing. Joseph Smith is not the author."⁷

Despite these public and private denials of authorship, the alleged letter to Nancy Rigdon, often referred to as the "Happiness Letter," because of its theological declaration at the outset—"Happiness is the object and design of our existence"—somehow eventually made its way into the Manuscript History of the Church. The text of it was subsequently published, without any introduction or explanation, in the serialized form of the "History of Joseph Smith" in the *Deseret News* in 1855.⁸ Though no original manuscript of the letter is extant and Bennett connected the letter to serious allegations of impropriety against Joseph Smith, the publication of it in the official History of the Church was enough to grant it unquestioned authenticity to later members of the Church and historians. Bennett's allegation that the context of the letter was the sinister intentions of Joseph Smith have similarly granted it a level of authenticity with critics—those opposed to the Mormon assertion that Joseph Smith was a prophet and those who have accepted Bennett's claim that Smith was instead a sexual deviant driven by carnal lust rather than revelatory injunction. The text of the letter has since been quoted extensively both by members of the LDS faith as well as those who are opposed to Smith and his teachings. Each group attributes the contents of the letter to Joseph Smith, but for starkly contrasting reasons. Historians have also generally accepted the document as authentically Smith's because, though controversial in nature, the LDS church itself endorsed the document by publishing it in the official *History of the Church*, and it has been extensively quoted in sermons and curriculum materials as well.⁹

Despite its popularity, however, it presents special problems of provenance and authenticity to historians. These problems compound the difficulty with which the document can be contextually understood. In effect, historians cannot demonstrate with certainty that Joseph Smith wrote the letter, as they can with other Joseph

⁷"Bennett's Letters," *Wasp*, August 27, 1842.

⁸"History of Joseph Smith: August 1842," *Deseret News*, December 12, 1855.

⁹Originally published in 1909. Volume 5 of the *History of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints* contains the "Happiness Letter" and has been republished in several subsequent editions. (Joseph Smith, Jr., *History of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, edited by B. H. Roberts, 7 vols. (Salt Lake City: Deseret News, 1909), 5:134.

Smith documents. The only “original” text is found in the pages of the *Sangamo Journal*. Even if Smith’s authorship is assumed, however, Bennett’s claim placing it in the context of a failed proposal to Nancy Rigdon also cannot be demonstrated with certainty, as there are competing accounts of the interactions between the two of them. It is not the intent of this article to make a definitive claim that Joseph Smith did not author the “Happiness Letter” nor that he did not make a polygamous proposal to Nancy Rigdon. Smith was already engaged in Nauvoo-era polygamy, and these marriages were kept secret from the general membership of the Church and the community at large. Marinda Hyde, who factored prominently in Bennett’s account of the proposal, eventually became a polyandrous wife of Smith, and she had already been approached by him with an explanation of “the doctrine of Celestial marriage” in the fall of 1841.¹⁰ Given these factors, a proposal by Smith to Nancy Rigdon would certainly not be extraordinary. Still, the purpose of this article is to illustrate the difficulties involved in any attempt to gain a clear

¹⁰Marinda Nancy Johnson Hyde statement, LDS Church History Library, Salt Lake City (hereafter Church History Library). Shortly after the private conversation attested to by Hyde in this document, Joseph Smith received a revelation on her behalf, which is usually regarded as referencing a future polyandrous marriage: “Let my handmaid Nancy Marinda Hyde hearken to the council of my servant Joseph in all things whatsoever he shall teach unto her, and it shall be a blessing upon her and upon her children after her, unto her justification saith the Lord.” Joseph Smith, Journal, January 25, 1842, MS 155, Church History Library. The date of Hyde’s marriage/sealing to Smith is not known with certainty. An 1869 affidavit signed by Hyde attested that she was not married to him until 1843. However, what appears to be a list of Smith’s polygamous wives is found in his journals in Thomas Bullock’s handwriting and sets the date as April 1842. (Joseph Smith, Journal, July 14, 1842, MS 155, Church History Library) These competing dates are often given great importance, as one places the marriage during the time in which her husband, Orson Hyde, was absent on a mission and the other places it after he had already returned. If the April 1842 date is correct, then Hyde may have already been married to Smith before the Nancy Rigdon incident, a scenario that makes her direct involvement all the more plausible. However, even if her sealing to Smith did not occur until 1843, as she later attested, Hyde had already received some teachings on the subject in 1841, according to her testimony.

understanding of this document and to outline the reasons to both doubt and to impute Smith's authorship of the document. The ultimate determination of authorship hinges on the reasons why it was first excluded and then later included in the Manuscript History of the Church. As those reasons can only be met with speculation, a measure of caution should be employed when assigning authorship. Rather than attributing it casually and definitively to Joseph Smith, historians and theologians, Mormons and non-Mormons alike, should be aware of the questioned provenance when using the document and draw measured rather than expansive conclusions. Simply put, if this were any other document, historians would greatly question the claims of authorship for the reasons that will follow.

BENNETT AND PROVENANCE

That some type of letter existed seems to almost be beyond doubt. Sidney Rigdon's published denial does not deny the existence of a letter, but rather that it was not "written by said Mr. Smith, nor in his hand writing, but by another person, and in another person's hand writing." How and when Bennett obtained the letter is not entirely clear, nor can his declaration of provenance be verified. Writing his second letter to the *Sangamo Journal* from Carthage, Illinois, on July 2, 1842, only days after the confrontation between the Rigdons and Smith occurred over the Bennett allegations, Bennett referenced the letter but said that he did not have it in his possession. He stated that he had "seen it, so has her father, and various other persons." In his third letter two days later, Bennett explained that he was "now going over to Missouri to have Joe taken to justice" and was then going to travel "to New York to publish a book, to be called 'The History of the Saints.'" ¹¹ On July 7, he was still in Carthage, when he swore out an affidavit against Porter Rockwell, ¹² but by July 15, Bennett had already arrived in St. Louis and published statements implicating Smith in the attempted murder of former governor Lilburn Boggs. He wrote his fifth denunciatory letter from Louisville on July 23 and did not write the sixth letter until August 3, while onboard a ship in Lake Erie on his way to New York City. It was in this final letter that Bennett, for the first time, reported the text of the "Happiness Letter." He explained, "I proceed to transcribe and forward you an

¹¹"Gen. Bennett's Third Letter," *Sangamo Journal*, July 15, 1842.

¹²"Disclosures—The Attempted Murder of Boggs!" *Sangamo Journal*, July 22, 1842; "Gen. John C. Bennett," *Louisville Daily Journal*, July 27, 1842.

exact copy of Joe Smith's letter to Miss Nancy Rigdon per William Richards, one of the Holy Mormon Apostles, alluded to in one of my former communications."¹³

Bennett provided no details as to how he obtained the letter. On July 2, he did not have the letter in his possession, and during a month of nearly constant traveling in which he was not in one location for more than a week at a time, it would have been nearly impossible for the letter or a copy of it to have found him by the regular mail. Though he did not describe to the readers of the *Sangamo Journal* how he had obtained the letter, in his later book, *The History of the Saints: Or, An Exposé of Joe Smith and Mormonism*, Bennett explained, "The original, of which the above is a literal copy, in the hand-writing of Dr. Richards, is now in my possession. It was handed me by Colonel F. M. Higbee, in the presence of General George W. Robinson."¹⁴ For this face-to-face meeting between the three men to have occurred, in which the letter was transferred, it could only have come after Bennett wrote his July 2 letter from Carthage, but before he left for Missouri a few days later.¹⁵

Proper source criticism requires Bennett's explanation of the provenance and context of the letter to be seen in a dubious light rather than being readily embraced by researchers. First, the medium

¹³"6th Letter From Gen. Bennett, Joe Smith's Letter to Miss Rigdon," *Sangamo Journal*, August 19, 1842. The editor of the *Sangamo Journal* apparently misread Willard Richards' name as "William."

¹⁴John Cook Bennett, *The History of the Saints: Or, An Exposé of Joe Smith and Mormonism* (Boston: Leland & Whiting, 1842), 245. Bennett later published a letter attributed to George Robinson and addressed to himself in which Francis Higbee said he would "get" the letter, implying that it was not in the possession of either Robinson or Higbee on July 3, 1842. In another letter attributed to Robinson by Bennett and sent to James Arlington Bennet, the letter to Nancy Rigdon was again referenced and Robinson reported that the letter was present and discussed when Smith and the Rigdons had their confrontation on June 28. However, as none of these letters can be independently verified, it is possible that Bennett, with or without the aid of Robinson, may have been deliberately trying to create a chain of custody of the letter by averring its existence and when and where it was acquired.

¹⁵Bennett published a letter attributed to Francis Higbee in his book dated July 6, 1842. In it, Higbee expressed his intention to come to Carthage to see Bennett. The meeting in which a transfer of the letter could have occurred likely did not happen before July 7.

through which Bennett published the “Happiness Letter” was a Whig paper that had vociferously voiced its opposition to the Mormons, enraged at Mormon support for the Democratic gubernatorial candidate, Thomas Ford. The *Sangamo Journal* devoted much of its space to denunciations of the Mormons, especially their political influence and the power of the Nauvoo City Charter. That the *Journal* was hardly a dispassionate reporter in the Bennett imbroglio was readily recognized by another fiercely partisan and competing newspaper, the *Illinois Register*. The Democratic *Register* challenged that the *Sangamo Journal* was only publishing Bennett’s letters because it suited Whig political purposes, as it highlighted the supposed “bargain” that existed between the Democrats and Mormons. The *Register* further alleged that the *Journal* had suppressed the publication of documents that proved Bennett guilty of hypocrisy and provided its own evidence to demonstrate that fact. While the papers railed back and forth over which one was telling the truth, it is important to note that Bennett’s publication was injected into this highly partisan and bitter political struggle, thus giving the *Journal* every reason to publish his letters and no reason to examine any of the documents or allegations critically.

Second, and more importantly, the purpose of Bennett’s publications was to denounce Mormonism in general and Smith in particular. In fact, Bennett claimed in his book that the entirety of his association with Mormonism was a well-conceived, years-long, premeditated attempt to expose and destroy Mormonism and Smith. Bennett declared, “It at length occurred to me that the surest and speediest way to overthrow the Impostor, and expose his iniquity to the world, would be to profess myself a convert to his doctrines.” He emphatically asserted that he did this out of a sense of Christian, civic, and national duty to protect the country from the Mormons and that he “never believed in them or their doctrines.”¹⁶

While this does not in and of itself mean that all of his statements should be taken as untrue, the vehemence with which he reiterated that his entire intention of joining the Mormons was to destroy them and Smith forces the historian to pause at any subsequent evidence he later produced to sustain those premeditated claims, especially when no manuscript copy of the document is extant. If Bennett had in fact been a truly converted Mormon at one point who then became disaffected over the actions of Joseph Smith, his testimony, while still questionable, could probably be granted greater veracity. However,

¹⁶Bennett, *The History of the Saints*, 5–7.

as someone who claimed to be so passionately and calculatingly designing the demise of the religion, it is certainly not a stretch to conclude he might have been willing to take things out of context at best and make dishonest accusations at worst to achieve what he considered to be a noble end.

Of course, most would argue that Bennett had in fact had been a believing Mormon at one point before his break with Smith, despite his repeated refutation of such ideas after his excommunication. But to reject Bennett's acclaimed purpose and motives is to assign to Bennett a great level of dishonesty in the very same denunciatory publication one is using for evidence. It is Bennett that patently denounces any intimation that he once believed in Mormonism.

Still, Bennett's claim of a calculated sting operation is rendered quite dubious by the fact that shortly after the death of Smith he joined himself to the followers of James Strang and his branch of Mormonism. Was he seeking to overthrow and expose this branch as well? For the next several years following his apostasy from the Church, paid public speeches denouncing Mormonism and sales of his book were his primary income. Thus, whatever the truthfulness of his claims, it was certain he profited from them. When he wrote his *History of Utah*, Hubert Howe Bancroft inveighed against Bennett and his sources in a lengthy commentary that concluded, "This author is a charlatan, pure and simple; such was he when he joined the Mormons, and before and after."¹⁷

Further muddying the waters is the way in which Bennett apparently forged a Smith document shortly after the latter's death and before he joined the Strangite branch of Mormonism. Bennett produced both a revelation and a cover letter allegedly containing Smith's signature in which Smith purportedly explained that the succession of the Church leadership was not to be through the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles, thus indirectly sustaining Strang's claim to the right of succession. Bennett claimed that Smith had given him the revelation in a sealed document with a covenant to only open it in the event of his death. To grant this claim any validity at all, the historian is forced to believe that Bennett spent more than two years giving lectures and publishing statements and books denouncing Smith and Mormonism as the greatest of evil imposters, all the while he safeguarded this

¹⁷Hubert Howe Bancroft, *The Works of Hubert Howe Bancroft*, Vol. XXVI, *History of Utah, 1540–1886* (San Francisco: The History Company, 1889), 150.

revelation and kept his word not to open it until Smith's death, even in his mad dash to collect documents that could be used to denounce Smith. Such a scenario strains the limits of all reasonable doubt. Though this later forgery claiming provenance through Bennett is not directly linked to the Nancy Rigdon letter, its existence must be carefully weighed when considering the authenticity of the "Happiness Letter."¹⁸ If Bennett, as it appears is almost certainly the case, forged a Smith document in one case, then trusting him as the sole source of a text purporting to be Smith's is extremely speculative, as it would be to trust any document provenanced a known forger.¹⁹ If Bennett was willing to forge a letter in 1844, there is a strong likelihood that he would be willing to do so in 1842 as well.

Whether a one-time believer or a calculated charlatan masquerading as a Mormon, the veracity of Bennett's claim becomes much more difficult to determine because several of his statements appear to be outright falsehoods. For instance, Bennett claimed that there were Cyprian, Chambered, and Cloistered orders in the Relief Society organization and that some belonged to the order of the White,

¹⁸Bennett claimed that the revelation was given to him on April 7, 1841, the same day he became a member of the First Presidency. Neither of the extant copies contains Joseph Smith's handwriting, or Bennett's for that matter. One in private possession is in an unidentified hand, but the copy of another version at the Church History Library is in the handwriting of Wilson Law and given the date and location at the bottom "Hampton, Rock Island County, Illinois, Nov. 6th 1844." Several former members of the church were also in Hampton, including Robert and Charles Foster, Chauncey and Francis Higbee, William McLellin, Austin Cowles, John and Samuel Hicks, and John C. Bennett. It is likely the Law copy was created in Hampton after it was presented to him there by Bennett. See Lorenzo Brown, *Reminiscences and Diaries*, MS 4957, Church History Library.

¹⁹Bennett also claimed that Smith had written to several other women in a similar fashion to Nancy Rigdon trying to convince them to enter into polygamous unions as well. He reproduced one of these purported letters in his book, allegedly written to Emeline White, a non-Mormon woman living in Nauvoo, who he supposedly wrote to professing his affection when he was in Springfield, and signed "Old White Hat" as a code name for Joseph Smith. Like the "Happiness Letter," no manuscript versions of any of these alleged Smith letters are extant either. The two letters could not be more different in style and content.

some to the order of the Green, and some to the order of the Black veil. Even if one accepted his premise that the entire purpose for the creation of the Relief Society was to more readily provide “spiritual wives” for Joseph Smith, there are no records that indicate in any way that the Relief Society was segregated into such exotic orders using this terminology. Further, though Bennett originally denied any infidelity and argued it had been Smith who was practicing “spiritual wifery” and that he had withdrawn from the church on his own accord because his level of disgust had become too great, at a speaking engagement two years later he admitted that he had, in fact, been “expelled for some indiscretions with a ‘sister.’” A newspaper reported that Bennett had “commenced by giving with remarkable candor and plainness the history of his amour with a ‘gentle princess’ of Nauvoo; the Mormons, however, he declared were themselves guilty of the very sin for which they had excommunicated him.”²⁰ Thus, Bennett had for years denied any sexual misconduct leading to his excommunication, but then later admitted he had indeed been involved in a sexual liaison with at least one woman in Nauvoo. This admission further imperils his credibility.

Indeed, Stephan Markham, as part of the concerted Mormon effort to rebut and discredit Bennett, swore to an affidavit to the effect that Bennett had himself been involved in “an unlawful and illicit intercourse” with Nancy Rigdon and testified that he saw “many vulgar, unbecoming and indecent sayings and motions pass between them.” Markham’s salacious testimony raised the ire of several Rigdon family members and Nauvoo residents, and Sidney Rigdon denounced the slandering of his daughter with his own affidavit stating categorically that Markham was “not to be believed; that his word for truth and veracity is not good; that he could not believe said Markham under oath.”²¹

George W. Robinson, who was married to Sidney Rigdon’s oldest daughter, Athelia, and who left the Church during the summer of 1842, also railed against Markham in a letter to Bennett, stating that the oath by Markham was nothing more than an attempt by Smith

²⁰“Great Mormon Excitement,” *Cleveland Plain Dealer*, April 24, 1844; reprinted from the *Boston Times*.

²¹“More of Joe Smith’s Villainies,” *Sangamo Journal*, September 23, 1842.

to “get around the affair with Nancy . . . at the expense of her character.”²²

However, Markham’s questionable account was corroborated to a degree several years later, if still poorly evidenced. When writing his invective against Sidney Rigdon’s claims to the leadership of the Church in 1845, apostle Orson Hyde provided a different explanation for the encounter between Smith and Nancy Rigdon. Hyde argued that the initial encounter between Nancy Rigdon and Smith was under radically different circumstances than those alleged by Bennett. Hyde proclaimed:

During my absence to Palestine, the conduct of his [Rigdon’s] daughter, Nancy, became so notorious in this city, according to common rumor, she was regarded generally, little if any better than a public prostitute. Joseph Smith knowing the conduct she was guilty of, felt anxious to reprove and reclaim her if possible. He, accordingly, requested my wife to invite her down to her house. He wished to speak with her and show her the impropriety of being gallanted about by so many different men, many of whom were comparatively strangers to her. Her own parents could look upon it, and think that all was right; being blind to the faults of their daughter.—There being so many of this kind of men visiting Mr. Rigdon’s house at the steamboat landing, (for he kept some sort of tavern or boarding house,) that Mr. Smith did not care to go there to see her. Miss Nancy, I presume, considered her dignity highly insulted at the plain and sharp reproof she received from this servant of God. She ran home and told her father that Mr. Smith wanted her for a spiritual wife, and that he employed my wife to assist him in obtaining her. This was a good time for Miss Nancy and John C. Bennett to wreak vengeance on the victim of their hatred for his severe admonitions. Mr. Bennett, I think, was a boarder at Mr. Rigdon’s at that time, and I am told was all honey with the whole family. No one likes Dr. John C. Bennett.²³

²²Bennett, *The History of the Saints*, 248. Colonel Carlos Gove of Nauvoo Legion, John F. Olney, and Henry Marks all reportedly attested to the virtue of Nancy Rigdon and refuted Markham’s claims. *Ibid.*, 249–52.

²³Orson Hyde, *Speech of Elder Orson Hyde Delivered Before the High Priests Quorum in Nauvoo, April 27th, 1845, Upon the Course and Conduct of Mr. Rigdon, and Upon the Merits of His Claims to the Presidency of Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints* (City of Joseph, Illinois: Printed by John Taylor, 1845), 27–28.

Hyde's statement has often been discounted as a desperate and pejorative attack upon Nancy Rigdon's character for the purpose of discrediting her and her father and concealing polygamy. Indeed, as an apostle second only to Brigham Young in seniority in the Quorum and one who was himself secretly practicing polygamy, Hyde had every reason to fabricate and embellish this explanation of the Nancy Rigdon episode to both defend Smith and solidify his own hold on power. It has also been observed that Hyde was not even in the country at the time of the first meeting between Smith and Nancy Rigdon or any of the subsequent fallout, and thus his story has been afforded little credibility.

But if these principles of negation are applied by historians to the evidence across the board, they would just as similarly disqualify Bennett's version of events. Bennett also had every reason to make his accusations against Smith. While Bennett, unlike Hyde, was present in Nauvoo at the time, his information on Smith's meeting with Nancy Rigdon, during which Bennett claimed Smith had attempted to "seduce" Nancy Rigdon, and the production and provenance of the letter was at best third hand, according to Bennett's own statements. Hyde's information about the purposes of the interview with Nancy Rigdon could have been readily relayed by his wife, Marinda, who was intimately involved in the entire scenario, according to Bennett's version of events. If the events took place as Bennett claimed they did, then Orson Hyde would have had access to as much information from a principal actor as did Bennett. Hyde's statements should be critically analyzed and used with extreme hesitancy by historians, but prudence demands that this same level of source criticism should also be applied to Bennett's statements as well; both men had the incentive to manipulate the truth, and both had similar levels of access to information about the event. Both men had the testimony of others to corroborate at least part of their statements, but those witnesses were also similarly biased: Markham was a faithful member who connected Nancy Rigdon to Bennett in an illicit relationship, perhaps in a disingenuous effort to publicly exonerate Smith; Robinson was a Rigdon family member who defended Nancy Rigdon's honor and Bennett's version of events and who had recently been estranged from and then cut off by the Church. In any case, Bennett's later admission that he was involved in an affair with an unnamed woman in Nauvoo allows for at least the possibility that Nancy Rigdon was in fact that woman.

The preceding does not demonstrate conclusively that the “Happiness Letter” was not authored or dictated by Smith, but it does require the careful historian to seriously question Bennett’s version of events. Smith may have in fact authored the letter and have done so to persuade Nancy Rigdon to accept plural marriage as part of his larger efforts to practice clandestine polygamy in Nauvoo; he also may have authored the letter to convince her that it was wrong in the eyes of God to engage in sexual relations with men to whom she was not married, as the Hyde explanation might indicate, perhaps even including Bennett. Smith also may have authored it for Bennett himself in order to chastise him for engaging in “spiritual wifery” without the Lord’s (or Joseph’s) consent; Smith may have written it for another person under different circumstances entirely and it was just misappropriated to help prove Bennett’s gratuitous claims. It is also possible that the letter may have been authored by another individual, perhaps even Bennett himself, who was clearly not above forging a Joseph Smith document to suit his purposes. But in any case, using Bennett as both the source and context of a document that no longer exists is highly problematic at best.

THE ACCEPTANCE OF THE LETTER IN LDS HISTORY

Despite the very questionable nature of the claims made by Bennett, most Mormons and historians alike have accepted the letter as an authentic Joseph Smith document because it was copied into the Manuscript History of the Church and was eventually published in various formats by the Church. This alone seemed to remove all doubt of at least Smith’s authorship of the letter, if not its intended recipient or context.²⁴ Because so many have uncritically accepted this document to be Smith’s, primarily because it was copied into the

²⁴Lawrence Foster, for instance, concluded that the letter could “all but conclusively be identified as a letter sent from Smith to Nancy Rigdon, pressing his suit to her after she had initially rejected his overtures.” Foster referred to the letter as the “most vivid example” of the “apparent casualness of some of the early polygamous overtures.” For both the authenticity of the provenance of the letter and the purpose for and context in which it was written, Foster cited that the letter had been “acknowledged by Latter-day Saints as coming from Joseph Smith” and it was “printed in volume 5 of the *History of the Church*.” Lawrence Foster, *Between Two Worlds: Women, Family, and Utopia: Communal Experiments of the Shakers, the Oneida Community, and the Mormons* (Syracuse, N.Y.: Syracuse University Press, 1991).

History, it is essential then to understand how and when the document was inserted into that record.

Willard Richards, whom Bennett named as the scribe of the original “Happiness Letter,” was also the historian tasked with compiling the church history covering 1842 while the Church was still in Nauvoo. In creating his private draft notes, Richards silently passed over any mention of Nancy Rigdon in April 1842, when the initial meeting between herself and Smith occurred, nor did he mention her when he covered the confrontation between Smith and Sidney Rigdon explained in Smith’s journal on June 28. In fact, Richards’s notes did not reference the matter with Nancy Rigdon at all, nor any letter, until the August 27, 1842, entry. Here, after noting a letter from Emma Smith to Illinois Governor Thomas Carlin, Richards wrote, “See Sidney Rigdon’s Letter on account of his daughter Nancy.” Following that notation, an insertion was made: “Wasp page 79.”²⁵ The letter Richards cited was the same published in the September 3 *Wasp*, in which Sidney Rigdon denied on behalf of his daughter that she had ever said Joseph Smith was the author of the letter Bennett had published—the “Happiness Letter.” Richards, who according to Bennett was the most intimately involved in the creation of the letter, made no mention of the “Happiness Letter” itself except to cite Sidney Rigdon’s August 27 denial of Joseph Smith authorship.

For whatever reason, when, years later, Thomas Bullock came to the August 27 entry as he was writing out the Manuscript History in book D-1, he did not include the Sidney Rigdon denial letter as Richards had noted in the draft.²⁶ He simply ended his entry with

²⁵*History of the Church* draft notes, CR 100, box 1, folder 1, 9. The number “79” is difficult to make out, resembling the number “19” at initial glance.

²⁶D-1 began with entries of history for August 1842. Bullock commenced writing in D-1 on May 5, 1845, and over the course of the next several months sporadically worked on it. By August 3, 1845, Bullock had already completed the 1842 history up to November 26. Because Bullock often described the sources he was writing from and the August 27 entry as exclusively from the Law of the Lord, it appears most likely that he actually created the entry in the history on May 5 or 6 or May 19 or 20. On the other days he described writing from other sources, and by June 9 he was using the Doctrine and Covenants as a source, which he used for the September 1 and 6 entries [Doctrine and Covenants, 127 and 128]. See the Church Historian’s Office Journal for dates listed.

the Emma Smith letter. Thus, for more than a decade, there was no mention of the “Happiness Letter” in the Manuscript History at all. In late November 1845, Bullock read the history contained in this volume to both George A. Smith and Willard Richards, and there is no notation in volume D-1 next to the August 27 entry suggesting that any information needed to be inserted at the time of that reading.²⁷ According to Franklin Richards’s journal entry covering these same days, Bullock was making revisions to D-1 after reading the document to Smith and Richards, but Bullock did not make a revision to the August 27 entry that would later be associated with the “Happiness Letter” when the history was published.²⁸ Bullock had also begun to copy D-1 into a second volume, D-2, and he turned that business over to another clerk, Wilmer Benson. When Benson reached the August 27 entry, he left a space at the bottom as though something was to be inserted, but that space was left blank.

After Willard Richards’s death in 1854, George A. Smith assumed control of the Historian’s Office and continued the process of preparing the History for publication in the *Deseret News*. During this process, revisions were made to the previous drafts, including the consultation of Richards’s original draft notes. Bullock was tasked with sorting and filing the papers that were in Richards’s desk at the time of his death, and he may have reviewed his notes again at that time. One of the clerks involved in these revisions was young Leo Hawkins, who had joined the Historian’s Office in September 1853 at the age of nineteen. Hawkins eventually wrote some of the text of volume D-1 and nearly all of the text for volume F-1. However, he also made revisions of the text in D-1 that Bullock had written out years earlier. One of Hawkins’s revisions was to the fateful August 27 entry, where he inserted at the end: “See Addenda Page 3.” On the third page of the addenda, the “Happiness Letter” was then copied in, without any explanation, assignment of authorship, date, addressee, or context whatsoever.²⁹ It is unclear precisely when Hawkins made

²⁷See Church Historian’s Office Journal, November 24–18, 1845. It is possible that notes on needed changes were made in another document rather than the book itself as they were reading it, but if so, no record of this nature is extant.

²⁸Church Historian’s Office Journal, Vol. 6, November 24–28, 1845.

²⁹When book D was copied later that same year, this portion was copied by Wilmer Benson, another clerk. He left a space below the August 27 entry as though something was going to be inserted.

the insertion and the addenda, but he worked with D-1 several times in 1855.

It is also possible that Hawkins did not copy in the “Happiness Letter” until after Bullock entered it in the other history volume, D-2. The date Bullock copied the letter into that book is one of the few things surrounding the letter that is certain. The office journal of November 6, 1855, records that Bullock “copied ‘Happiness’ in D.2.”³⁰ The journal does not provide any insight into the reasons Bullock copied the letter into D-2. At the time he copied it in, George A. Smith, who supervised much of the history writing and revisions closely, was out of the office with an illness and had been for several days. When Benson had copied the initial portion of D-2, he had left a substantial space at the bottom of the August 27 entry for unknown reasons. One can only assume that, following the instructions in Richards’s draft notes, Benson left a space for the inclusion of the August 27 Sidney Rigdon denial of Smith’s authorship from the *Wasp*. On November 6, 1855, Bullock filled this empty space (with difficulty as it was apparently designed for a shorter letter) not with Rigdon’s denial letter, but with the text of the “Happiness Letter” without any introduction, addressee, or explanation. It was effectively just words on the page.³¹

The text of the letter was then subsequently published in the serialized “History of Joseph Smith” in the December 12, 1855, issue of the *Deseret News*, just weeks after Bullock inserted it into book D-2 as part of the August 27, 1842, entry. Just as in the Manuscript History books, the *Deseret News* provided no explanation, no introduction, and no context. It did not explain the text as a letter of Joseph Smith to Nancy Rigdon; it was simply unattributed words on the page, seemingly out of place and pasted on. This issue of the *Deseret News* did not go through the same proofreading checks as did other issues.

³⁰See Church Historian’s Office Journal, November 6, 1855.

³¹At some point during the Utah period, an “index” to the History was created that seemed to list sources for history dates that generally were not included in the Manuscript History. In it, Robert Campbell not only noted page 79 of the *Wasp* that contained Rigdon’s denial, he included pages 74 and 75, where the patent denial of Joseph Smith authorship by the *Wasp* was found, beginning on page 74 and then running to page 75. However, when the clerks edited volumes D-1 and D-2, they did not include any of the denials from the *Wasp*. Church Historian’s Office, CR 100 102, Vol. 4, Church History Library.

Usually the clerks and George A. Smith vetted the proof sheets of the *Deseret News* containing the history each week before publication. That errors were made at times in the publication of the History in the *Deseret News* is evident by the August 18, 1854, entry in the Historian's Office Journal in which Brigham Young was upset that some items he did not approve of were published and others that he wanted in had been left out. One of the clerks was blamed for that particular mistake in the absence of George A. Smith.³²

However, the week that the "Happiness Letter" was published, the entire staff of the Church Historian's Office departed for Fillmore, Utah, on December 3 for the meeting of the state legislature. They did not return until January 24 and thus did not examine the proofs of the *Deseret News* during the weeks they were absent. It is possible that had they vetted the proof sheets normally, they would have at least attempted to introduce the text in some way and attribute it to Joseph Smith rather than leaving it awkwardly standing alone on the page. After the publication, there seems to have been no notice given the issue. The Church Historian's Office Journal notes that the office clerks read portions of the December 7 issue of the *Deseret News*, and then, later during their stay in Fillmore, read a Baptist sermon from the December 19 *News*, but there is no indication of a careful examination of the contents of the December 12 issue that contained the "Happiness Letter." In fact, if this was a calculated effort to reintroduce this Joseph Smith teaching quietly back into Mormon dogma, the publication of it in the *Deseret News* history can only be judged an abject failure. This historian has not yet found evidence that anyone took notice of the newly published material for decades. It is not quoted in any meetings or general conference talks for which there are records. No journals of Mormon elites reference it as a Joseph Smith teaching during the nineteenth century at all.

The insertion of the letter into the Manuscript History in late 1855 is surrounded with multiple curiosities. First and foremost, why was it inserted at all? Why was the original plan to insert Sidney Rigdon's August 27, 1842, denial letter discarded in favor of publishing the text of the mid-April "Happiness Letter" out of place in that August entry? Was the insertion simply an accident by the clerk misunderstanding the meaning of "See Sidney Rigdon's letter on account of his daughter Nancy?" Did the clerks think this was the letter Richards had been referring to? If the insertion was deliberate rather than accidental,

³²Church Historian's Office Journal, August 18, 1854.

then why was it made where it was? The only thing connecting the “Happiness Letter” to August 27, 1842, was Willard Richards’s draft notes citing the denial of Joseph Smith’s authorship of it. However, according to Bennett’s account, the letter would have been written in mid-April 1842, not late August. If the intention was to place it in the history when it was first published, then why was it not inserted into the history on August 19, the date of Bennett’s publication of the text in the *Sangamo Journal*? The placement of the letter in the August 27, 1842, entry does not conform in any way to the date of the creation or publication of the letter itself, only to Sidney Rigdon’s denial of it.

Another unanswered question is why there was no attempt made to introduce or explain the text of the letter, let alone provide context. The reader is not informed by a heading that it was a sermon, letter, or teaching of Joseph Smith; it is not written in the first person in the same way text was always inserted into the history from Joseph Smith’s journal. These paragraphs are instead silently placed, without attribution, without introduction or explanation, into the August 27, 1842 history entry. While one can understand the reasons to omit Bennett’s version of events surrounding the letter, the lack of even a short “I taught” or “The Prophet taught” makes this insertion stick out as very unnatural. Congruently, if Richards had cited the denial in his private notes in order to keep polygamy a secret in Nauvoo, and the historians in Utah were aware of and trying to rectify this calculated omission at that time, why would they then so cautiously reintroduce the text without tying it to polygamy at a time when the doctrine was not only being openly practiced, but rigorously defended as a doctrine that had originated from Joseph Smith, despite the very public claims to the contrary by men like William Smith?³³

Finally, the source text for the “Happiness Letter” version copied into the Manuscript History is very clearly taken from John C. Bennett’s 1842 book, *History of the Saints*, rather than from the “original” source in the *Sangamo Journal*. There are multiple textual differences between the two sources that demonstrate this point. Bullock and Hawkins evidently copied the document directly from Bennett’s anti-Mormon, vitriolic book. That they would use this book as a source

³³Remonstrance of William Smith et al., of Covington, Kentucky Against the Admission of Deseret into the Union, December 31, 1849. House Miscellaneous Document, No. 43, in *Miscellaneous Documents Printed by the Order of the House of Representatives During the First Session of the Thirty-First Congress, Vol. 1* (Washington D.C.: Wm. M. Belt, 1850).

for the text is fascinating. Were they directed to do so? Or did they mistakenly think that it was the only, or easiest, place they could find the “letter on account” of Nancy Rigdon? It would seem, at least, that the way Bullock entered it into the history in D-2 suggests that he likely believed it was a teaching or letter from Smith. Bullock, of course, had no firsthand knowledge of the Nancy Rigdon accusations or any of the contretemps with Bennett. A convert from England, he did not arrive in Nauvoo until 1843.

The only other attention paid to the letter was the creation of another manuscript copy years later that would serve to frustrate those seeking the provenance of the document. That manuscript copy, titled “The Letter of the Prophet Joseph Smith to Miss Nancy Rigdon,” was eventually catalogued in the Joseph Smith collection of the Church History Department and was often mistaken by researchers as an original, perhaps *the* original, letter. Archivist Christy Best has, however, demonstrated that the handwriting in this manuscript belongs to John Henry Smith. His handwriting dates this copy to the late 1860s, when John Henry Smith clerked in the Church Historian’s Office. At some point in the twentieth century, an archival worker placed a notation at the top, “ca. January 1842.”³⁴ It is unclear why the unknown archivist believed the letter came from January 1842, especially because the letter could not have been written before mid-April of 1842, according to Bennett’s account, but that notation has subsequently caused some researchers to classify it under that date. This John Henry Smith copy is the only LDS manuscript document that expressly states that Joseph Smith was the author and Nancy Rigdon the recipient until several early twentieth century publications, including Joseph Fielding Smith’s *Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith* in 1938. John Henry Smith’s purpose in copying it remains unknown, but it could suggest that in the late 1860s at least some workers in the Church Historian’s Office considered Joseph Smith to be the author of the letter and Nancy Rigdon the recipient. It is at least possible that he copied it in conjunction with the ongoing efforts in the late 1860s to prove that Joseph Smith taught and practiced polygamy. If this was the purpose, it too was a failure or abandoned as it was not utilized as a Joseph Smith document to make a public defense of polygamy in the nineteenth century.

While no one paid attention to the *Deseret News* publication of the text, Bennett’s arguments surrounding the letter resurfaced amidst

³⁴Joseph Smith Collection, MS 155, box 2, folder 5, Church History Library.

the intense antipolygamy/anti-Mormon movement of the 1880s, with Dr. Wilhelm Wymetal's overtly antagonistic "exposé" of Mormonism and Joseph Smith. Wymetal simply repeated all of the claims from Bennett's book and used it as the source for his reproduction of the letter's text, except that Wymetal excised the poetic portion that roughly quoted Edward Young's *Night Thoughts*. Wymetal claimed to have a source that told a provenance story of the letter; he claimed that Willard Richards had brought the letter to Nancy Rigdon, and she had taken it to read it in private, secretly copied it, and then tore up and threw the original into the fire in front of Richards. Wymetal did not seem to realize that this story was in direct conflict with the provenance story provided by Bennett, who asserted that he possessed the original letter in Richards's handwriting and that it had been handed to him in person.³⁵ Wymetal made no attempt to determine the veracity of Joseph Smith's authorship of the letter. Rather he declared: "I don't want anybody's testimony that this letter is genuine; I feel it in every line."³⁶ However, "feeling" that Joseph Smith authored a document is neither scientific nor verifiable, as many initially taken in by Mark Hoffman's deceitful forgeries and document sales would find out a century later.

When B. H. Roberts compiled and annotated the serialized "History of Joseph Smith" into the monumental *History of the Church*, he was clearly troubled by the lack of context given the text in the August 27 entry. Roberts did not excise it from the history, but this is hardly a definitive point in relation to authorship given the fact that he did not elsewhere excise portions of the already published history. Rather, he added annotations and sources to explain things that were already there. This document, splashed as it was on the page of the *Deseret News* without any introduction or attribution certainly needed some explanation. He added a title, "Happiness," to separate the text from the rest of the August 27 entry and then provided the following contextual explanation in a footnote: "It is not positively known what occasioned the writing of this essay; but when it is borne in mind that

³⁵Bennett, *The History of the Saints*, 245.

³⁶Wilhelm Wymetal, *Joseph Smith the Prophet, His Family and Friends* (Salt Lake City: Tribune Printing and Publishing Company, 1886), 288–91. Edger Estes Folk, the editor of the *Baptist and Reflector*, also produced the "Happiness Letter" in his 1901 anti-Mormon book, *The Mormon Monster*, but he not only copied his material from Bennett's book, he apparently copied the text of the letter directly from Wymetal's book, also excluding the Young poetry.

at this time the new law of marriage for the Church—marriage for eternity, including plurality of wives under some circumstances—was being introduced by the Prophet, it is very likely that the article was written with a view of applying the principles here expounded to the conditions created by introducing said marriage system.”³⁷

Roberts’s explanation did not explicitly say that the document was authored by Joseph Smith, nor did he provide any specific context aside from linking it to plural marriage, which the document itself does. It is possible that Roberts knew full well that it came from Bennett’s book and was carefully secreting this fact from the reader in order to leave out Bennett’s sordid and lurid details. It is also possible that Roberts was simply uncertain where the document originated and how it made its way into the history, because neither D-1, nor D-2, nor the *Deseret News* provided any explanation for the text. While the “Happiness Letter” and its connection with Bennett is at the forefront of the thoughts of historians and religious persons today who have made it a central part of Joseph Smith’s theology or allegations of debauchery, there is no evidence it was considered important at all when Roberts compiled his history, and thus he may not have made the Bennett connection. What is fairly certain is that he used the already published *Deseret News* version of the letter for the basis of his text, rather than the Manuscript History volumes or the loose copy in John Henry Smith’s handwriting. In his later *Comprehensive History of the Church*, Roberts did not address the existence of the letter, the proposal, or the teaching at all.

At nearly the same time Roberts was working on the *History of the Church*, John W. Rigdon began making public and written statements of his knowledge of the Joseph Smith/Nancy Rigdon controversy, again a part of the wider effort to prove that Joseph Smith had in fact taught and practiced polygamy despite the claims to the contrary made by leaders of the Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. In a *Deseret News* article published in 1900, Rigdon averred that Joseph Smith had “made a proposal of marriage to his sister Nancy.”³⁸ Rigdon subsequently provided a written affidavit directed at the claims of the Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, both over the issue of succession and Joseph Smith polygamy. In that affidavit, however, Rigdon recites the Smith proposal to his sister, but he does not appear to be in possession of firsthand facts,

³⁷Joseph Smith et al., *History of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, 5:134.

³⁸“John W. Rigdon in Salt Lake,” *Deseret Evening News*, May 21, 1900.

he being only eleven at the time the episode would have transpired. First, he said that the proposal occurred in “late 1843 or early 1844,” rather than early 1842. Second, he recited the story explaining the role of Marinda Hyde as “an old woman” multiple times. Hyde had actually been twenty-six or twenty-seven, hardly the tottering old widow portrayed by Rigdon. Rigdon further suggested that the information he had came from his older sister Athelia, the wife of embittered apostate George W. Robinson.³⁹ In any case, Rigdon’s assertion was part of his larger criticism and ongoing correspondence with the Reorganized LDS Church, particularly on the issue of Joseph Smith’s institution of polygamy.⁴⁰ Rigdon used Smith’s apparent proposal to his sister as proof that the doctrine originated with him, a refutation of Joseph Smith III’s public and private professions. Nevertheless, in none of these accounts did Rigdon present the “Happiness Letter” at all as being tied to this alleged proposal. A letter does not factor into Rigdon’s account, only a proposal to his sister, Nancy.

Despite its publication in the *History of the Church*, little attention was paid to the letter as a Joseph Smith document or of the passage as a Joseph Smith teaching. Edwin F. Parry was an exception, who published the text of the letter in his 1912 book, *Joseph Smith’s Teachings*, and cited it to the published *History of the Church*, without any explanation for the text at all.⁴¹ In an October 1926 conference address by J. Golden Kimball, part of the text of the letter was for the first time quoted from the General Conference pulpit. In an address that coincidentally followed the remarks of B. H. Roberts, Kimball incorporated several lines of the letter into his address, without citing them as quotations from Joseph Smith. To read the address one would assume the thoughts were from Kimball rather than a quotation from the “Happiness Letter,” as they were not attributed to Joseph Smith. Kimball again referenced the same talk in his October 1937 conference address; however, attribution was still not given to Smith.⁴²

³⁹John W. Rigdon, Manuscript, MS 3423, folder 3, Church History Library. Rigdon made similar claims in his 1904 letters to Arthur Welling. John W. Rigdon, Letter to Arthur Welling, February 20, 1904.

⁴⁰Joseph Smith III to John W. Rigdon, 24 July 1902, MS 3526, CHL

⁴¹Edwin F. Parry, *Joseph Smith’s Teachings: A Classified Arrangement of the Doctrinal Sermons and Writings of the Great Latter-day Prophet* (Salt Lake City, Deseret News, 1912), 64–67.

⁴²J. Golden Kimball, Report of the *Semi-Annual Conference of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, 1937 (Salt Lake City: Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, semiannual), 31.

Kimball's unattributed use of the "Happiness Letter" in his sermonizing might very well have gone unnoticed had it not been for the publication the following year of one of the most landmark works in LDS history. In 1938, Joseph Fielding Smith published his seminal work entitled *The Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith*. In it he included the text of the "Happiness Letter" from the published *History of the Church* and attributed it to Joseph Smith without providing any context for its creation. The publication of the text in this book, as well as the wider distribution in the *History of the Church* volumes, transformed the way it was used in discussions of Mormon theology. Still, it was not until 1955 that the familiar phrase on happiness from the letter was incorporated into a general conference talk with attribution given to Joseph Smith. Apostle Richard L. Evans and President David O. McKay both invoked this phrase as a teaching of Joseph Smith: "Happiness is the object and design of our existence." Both men cited Joseph Fielding Smith's published *Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith* as the source for the quotation, as did conference speakers Elray Christiansen and William Critchlow in 1958 and 1959, respectively. By the mid-twentieth century, the text was regularly attributed to Joseph Smith by both Mormon theologians and opponents of the Church alike. This was especially the case following Fawn Brodie's assertion of it as a Joseph Smith document in her 1945 book, *No Man Knows My History*, and Elder Bruce R. McKonkie's publication of it as a Smith teaching in his 1958 book, *Mormon Doctrine*. In the twentieth century, the "Happiness Letter" has been affirmed without question as a Joseph Smith document by both apologetic Mormon writers and leaders and those critical of Joseph Smith and the Church. Unfortunately, this has led to a similarly uncritical acceptance of the document among current writers, historians, and academics. Some, like Wymetal, may justify this supposition by the mere fact that the letter "sounds" like Joseph Smith or that it was copied into the *History of the Church* and therefore must be authentically Smith. But this cannot be accepted as an academic explanation.

The "Happiness Letter" holds a unique distinction in Mormon history as a Joseph Smith document. It has been as readily cited by LDS general authorities as a sublime truth taught by Joseph Smith as well as by critics seeking to criticize or explain Joseph Smith's engagement in plural marriage, using the polygamous context surrounding its creation. In effect, all sides have wanted the document to be authored by Joseph Smith and have embraced it without hesitation, not because it has a pristine provenance, because an original letter

exists, or because no uncertainties surround its inclusion in either Bennett's book or the LDS *History of the Church*. Rather, it has come to be culturally accepted by all sides as a Joseph Smith document/teaching, and the debate that exists occupies the stage of context alone rather than one over authenticity. Simply put, if this letter had been given any other context than Joseph Smith's practice of polygamy it would not be so readily defended as authoritatively Smith's. For instance, were it an unsourced, ambiguously provenanced account of Smith raising someone from the dead or indulging in a week of heavy binge drinking that came through the hands of a known forger, there is little doubt that its authenticity would be subject to the harshest criticism or scrutiny from either Mormons or the religion's detractors, and historians would be forced to be much more careful in their unabashed use of it as a Joseph Smith document.

The examination of the problematic provenance and questionable context of this document should in no way lead to the definitive conclusion that the letter was not authored or dictated by Joseph Smith. As stated before, the history of Joseph Smith's practice of polygamy in Nauvoo provides a context in which both the proposal to Nancy may have occurred and the subsequent letter indeed may have been produced. And the letter does seem to resemble Joseph Smith's language more readily than Bennett's other forgeries, but this has not been proven in a quantitative, academic way. Nevertheless, all users of this document should be aware of its questioned provenance, the inscrutable circumstances surrounding its inclusion and placement in the Manuscript History of the Church, and how it came to be regarded as unquestionably Joseph Smith's. It is simply not responsible to assert that the "Happiness Letter" was definitively authored by Smith when no original letter exists nor do any contemporary Mormons attribute it to him. Historical inertia has caused the document to be regarded as definitively Joseph Smith's rather than careful evaluation. Responsible historians should, after weighing the evidence, treat the letter, its contents, and its purported context very carefully. They should draw very measured and qualified conclusions when using the document either as a representation of Joseph Smith's doctrinal teachings or as context for Joseph Smith's practice of plural marriage in Nauvoo rather than relying on the presuppositions of an earlier age of writers, historians, apostates, or apologists.